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SUBJECT: DOMINICAN ELECTIONS #35: WHAT THIS ELECTION IS NOT
ABOUT

11. (SBU) The following is #35 in our series on the Dominican presidential elections:

Elections # 35 - What It's NOT About

In the Dominican presidential elections set for May 16, none of the leading political parties believes in blaming the United States for Dominican woes or sees any advantage in setting forth positions at odds with ours. For example, here are some of the topics that this election is NOT about:

- - A free trade agreement with the United States.

Secretary of Industry and Commerce Sonia Guzman and USTR

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Robert Zoellick announced the agreement on March 15. The March 26 PLD program, drafted in earlier months, promises simply &to continue negotiations toward a free trade agreement with the United States.⁸ Despite the complexity of the agreement and the potential tidal wave of its impact on government finances and the real economy, no one of consequence has opposed it. Yes, distinguished *&El Caribe*⁸ commentator Bernardo Vega just wrote a rueful piece about the eventual demise of the Dominican rice sector. But the only really sour commentator has been Frederico Cuello, Mejia's previous ambassador to the WTO (yanked because he could not get with the program). Cuello warned that Dominican producers would be overwhelmed by American exports, that China would raffle up any advantages in apparel, and that Dominicans should be stalwart with Brazil against the U.S. During the final round he even implied darkly that Dominican negotiators were in the pay of United States interests. No one has listened to him.

- - Dominican troops in Iraq. The Dominican armed forces are currently training a second six-month relief for the "Quisqueya" battalion. A new contingent would arrive at just about the same time as the August 16 presidential inauguration. Mejia's presidential opponents have not questioned Dominican participation, not even last week with Dominican troops under fire or when a Salvadoran soldier was killed. The PLD platform notes the difficult situation in Iraq but does not reject U.S. policy. After Easter mass Dominican Cardinal Nicolas de Jesus Lopez Rodriguez commented to an *El Caribe* journalist, "Our poor soldiers, I would like to see them come back as soon as possible." In response, Mejia told reporters in New York yesterday, "The agreement with the U.S. government lasts through July. We are allies of the United States. In June we'll see what happens" Opposition parties have not commented.

- - The tough medicine prescribed by the IMF... In unaccustomed fashion, Dominicans appear to have accepted that they got themselves into the current financial mess and that they will have to endure the cure. Presidential candidates blame one another for errors of commission or omission, opening a rich and entertaining exchange among the scribbling classes on the effects of corruption. Occasionally a wishful financial type calls for dollarization of the economy. No one has revealed that the USG politely declined Dominican suggestions of a \$300 million bridge loan or a long-term billion-dollar loan to restructure the tottering burden of Central Bank debt. Discussions of finances mention the United States only occasionally, chiefly when someone hopes U.S. courts will do the Dominicans, job for them on prosecuting bank fraud.

- - The United States and its ambassador. Over the past 70 years of Dominican history the personal representative of the U.S. President has often served, like the papal nuncio, as a decisive counterweight to the *&Jefe*⁸ currently in the presidency. Dominicans well recall the U.S. marines in 1965 and U.S. involvement in securing a resolution to the corrupted 1994 presidential election. President Mejia has forthright pro-U.S. policies and an evident appreciation of the Ambassador. None of the political parties has questioned the advisability of close relations with the United States. The PLD platform advocates closer alignment with CARICOM and with the developing countries of the *&Group of 218* from trade talks in Monterrey, but these are only nuances. During

an early March visit to Washington Leonel Fernandez advocated publicly and privately for even closer USG involvement in election monitoring. As for the Ambassador himself, the country's leading daily *&El Caribe*,⁸ generally sympathetic to the PLD, ran an editorial last December praising him for his *&dignity, prudence, impartiality and stature*⁸ and commenting, *&These qualities are evident to all, along with his certainty that his government will watch over the transparency of the elections this coming year.*⁸

And in fact, in contrast with other countries across the hemisphere, almost none of the fringe groups purport to be anti-Yanqui. The allure of the United States and all things (north) American remains a constant in the Dominican Republic.

12. (U) Drafted by Michael Meigs.

13. (U) This piece and other election reporting is available on the SIPRNET site
<http://www.state.sgov/p/wha/santodomingo/> index.cfm along with extensive other material.
HERTELL